DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 922 UD 025 652

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TITLE The Ninth Grade--A Precarious Time for the Potential Dropout. ERIC Digest No. 34.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jun 87
CONTRACT 400-86-0015
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Box 40 Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (single copy free with stamped self-addressed envelope).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Change Strategies; Dropout Characteristics; *Dropout Prevention; *Grade 9; *High Risk Persons; *School Holding Power; Secondary Education; Student Alienation; *Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The combined effects of many social, psychological, physical and educational factors make the ninth grade a level at which students have a high potential for dropping out of school. For those ninth graders who have already experienced attendance, discipline or academic problems the risk is even greater. A number of strategies have been developed to ease the trauma of the ninth grade and to prevent students from dropping out. These strategies include the following: (1) improving articulation between high school and earlier years of schooling; (2) deferring required courses to allow room for more electives in the ninth grade; (3) decreasing feelings of alienation in the ninth grade; (4) sensitizing teachers to the problems of being a ninth grader; (5) creating alternatives to retention before the ninth grade; and (6) planning special programs to orient middle school students and their parents to high school. These approaches, either alone or in combination, can help the at-risk student without vastly changing the basic structure of the high school. (VM)

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7-16-89

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

ISSN 0889-8049

ED284922

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THE NINTH GRADE—A PRECARIOUS TIME FOR THE POTENTIAL DROPOUT

The ninth grade is difficult for most students, and can be devastating for those who are anyway at risk. Not only are ninth grade students at an uncomfortable stage of adolescence, but the first year of high school demands a new degree of academic seriousness. Since high school graduation depends almost entirely on earning a specific number of credits, there are suddenly less flexible rules for promotion or retention. Moreover, the ninth grade traditionally is heavy with required courses.

The difficulty of the ninth grade is often increased in school districts where ninth graders are the youngest in a four-year senior high school. Older students can intimidate and tease, as well as offer both temptations and dangers in the form of gangs, drugs, and sex. For example, after ninth graders were integrated into a Seattle high school, changing it from a three- to a four-year school, the ninth grade students showed a marked increase in both absenteeism and dropping out over the next three years.[1]

A rise in both academic failures and dropping out highlight the precariousness of the ninth grade. Statistics from the State of Georgia show that a fifth of all K-12 students who are not promoted, and a quarter of all K-12 dropouts, are ninth graders.[2] In a sample of 30 New York City high schools (which begin with the ninth grade), 40 percent of the ninth graders failed two or more of their courses.[3]

Who Is at Risk?

Not surprisingly, the difficulties of the transition effect most heavily students who already suffer from attendance, discipline, and academic problems—those already at risk to drop out. For these students, the new high school can offer proof that school is too trying or alien, and that they cannot succeed. Those who do drop out have usually been retained at least a year along the way and have been "simply waiting for their 16th birthday so that they can legitimately leave."[4]

Even for those students who don't leave school right away, the first year of high school can predict early school leaving. In the New York City sample of ninth graders, "at least half of the students who went on to drop out had entirely unsatisfactory first-term records: excessively absent, and failing all or nearly all of their course."[5]

Strategies for Holding Onto Ninth Graders

Over the last several years, often as part of dropout prevention programs, school districts have experimented with a number of strategies to alleviate the most obvious sources of trouble in the ninth grade. Some of these strategies demand restructuring for all ninth graders; others are aimed at small groups of students who may find the transition to high school particularly difficult:

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Improving articulation between the earlier years of schooling and high school. As the problems of a lack of coordination between the academic and behavioral demands of elementary, junior or middle school, and high school have become clear to administratorsin many school districts, administrators have made a number of attempts to create better coordination, such as:

- Meetings have been initiated between middle school and high school staff to improve curriculum planning, and middle school administrators have joined elementary and high school curriculum planning teams.
- Principals at all three levels have begun to visit schools at the other levels in their districts.
- Counseling programs are being coordinated to take into consideration changes in students as they mature, as well as changes in expectations of school staff.

Deferring required courses. Commonly, the majority of ninth grade courses are required for high school graduation. This means that students cannot take courses that might offer pleasure or relief, and a student who fails one or more courses can easily feel that his or her academic chances are over.

However, shifting some required courses upward to the tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades gives ninth graders more room for electives, while at the same time providing upper class members with fuller and more challenging course loads.[8]

Decreasing alienation of the high school. Breaking down the large high school into small, stable units and ensuring personal attention can decrease alienation in the ninth grade.

- Students can be given *homeroom teachers* who also function as mentors and personal guides.
- Schedules can be modified, *extending class periods* and lessening the need for students to move from class to class every 50 or 60 minutes.
- Schools can create clusters of students who remain together through two or three subjects, in what is sometimes known as *block programming*. Several urban districts use block programs in the mornings and save the afternoons for cultural enrichment, work, internships, or counseling.[9]
- Special *alternative schools* and *mini-schools* can be created for students whose prior academic achievement, attendance and/or behavior indicate that they are disaffected. Newark, for example, runs an alternative school, Project Opportunity, for ninth grade repeaters who would otherwise be likely to drop out. Its key features are a more structured school day, smaller classes, more individualized instruction, a greater and more interdisciplinary focus on basic skills, and extensive family/school involvement.[8]

Sensitizing teachers. All teachers can be made more sensitive to the problems of ninth graders. Schools can give their best and most experienced teachers the ninth grade assignments, rather than their newest and least experienced teachers, as is commonly the case.

Creating alternatives to retention before the ninth grade. Although retention in the early grades may give an immature student time to mature,[9] it more often results in stigma, low esteem, and waning motivation,[10] without offering any significant long- or short-term gains.[11] In fact, some feel that being overage appears to exacerbate the tendency of at risk students to drop out.[12]

Alternatives to retention in the early grades can allow students to learn new material at their needed pace. In the middle school years, programs can be created that help seventh grade students who should be in the ninth grade to complete three years' work in two years.

The Hartford Public School Systems runs Project Bridge for seventh grade students whose average age is 16, and who are likely candidates for dropping out. The program includes an intensive academic program that lasts two school years, as well as a six-week summer remediation and work program.[13]

Special programs to orient middle school students to high school. Many school districts that have a middle school/high school configuration have begun to provide a variety of programs to smooth the passage from eighth grade to high school.[14] To ensure that students receive the benefit of these programs, some school districts have stopped their policy of allowing students to enter the ninth grade mid-year.

- *After-school activities* can be offered at the high school for eighth grade school students.
- Small groups of middle school students can be taken on *visits to high schools* to meet faculty, tour the building, receive a general orientation, and possibly be assigned a high school student mentor.
- *Shadowing*, in which a middle school student follows a high school student throughout part or all of the school day, can acquaint students with what their high school days will be like.
- *Orientation programs* can be created for incoming students that may run from as little as the first day of high school, to one day a month, or even the entire semester. In Seattle, orientation takes the form of a semester-long course for all entering ninth graders whose title, "Route 19XX", denotes the year they will graduate. Classes are small, and topics include expectations and rules for academic and social behavior, possible courses of study, school organization and tradition, self-awareness, multicultural human relations,

decision-making about drugs, study skills, and career planning. Since the program's inception, a 22-28 percent dropout rate has been reduced to 12 percent.[15]

• *Orientation programs for parents* can parallel those for the students, so that parents can be actively involved in the students' progress through high school.

In one school district, monthly programs during the freshman year get parents involved as chaperones, on an advisory committee, and in various projects that culminate in graduation. Parents become well informed about the grading system and strategies for remediation, as well as about courses of study and the timing of preparation for various college or career plans.[16]

• *Upper class students* can also be worked with, in meetings of the student body, in clubs, and in small groups to decrease intimidation and to create a greater receptivity toward the incoming ninth graders.

Easing the Transition—a Multiple Approach

Although going from middle or junior high school to high school cannot be entirely without stress even for the good student, a number of approaches, either alone, or in combination, can help the at risk student. Currently, districts around the country have implemented such strategies as creating social linkages, ensuring academic articulation, deferring required courses, creating block programs, sensitizing teachers, and creating alternatives to retention all ease the transition for students without requiring vast changes in the basic structure of the high school.

—Carol Ascher

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This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0015. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.

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